

# THE NEWS LETTER

OF THE COLLEGE ENGLISH ASSOCIATION

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UNION COLLEGE : SCHENECTADY, N. Y.

SEPTEMBER, 1944

## Post-War Literature Courses

Unless I am much mistaken there will be after the war a strong demand for greater emphasis on American Literature. The Survey of British Literature to which in many colleges two semesters are devoted has aroused increasing dissatisfaction, and to try to extend it to cover a Survey of American Literature as well would be even more unsatisfactory, almost as much of an educational gold brick as are World Literature courses. After all there are limits to thinness of treatment.

Would it perhaps be practical to devote the introductory year in literature to selected British and American authors, abandoning the attempt to present the development of literature, and omitting books whose importance is mainly historical, to give our attention to material of living interest to-day?

A possible choice would be as follows:

Chaucer as potentially the most popular of all English authors once his language is even superficially acquired: I suppose the Prologue would be the inevitable selection.

Then Shakespeare, a comedy and a tragedy.

Not Spenser or Jonson or Dryden or Milton except as noted below. Really to enjoy them one must read enough to become more or less at home in their world. A little acquaintance is only likely to repel.

A little Bacon; the Fight of the Revenge; a little Pepys; an abridged Pilgrim's Progress.

Pope's Essay on Man; part of Gulliver; a few essays by Addison and Steele; a little Boswell; at least two or three pages from Burke. The cult of the complete classic should be abandoned. We have lost the benefits of Burke's wisdom which we sorely need to-day because we insisted on including all the dead stuff in his Speech on Conciliation.

It would be sensible to leave out novels and plays, but if they must be included there would be Robinson Crusoe, Tom Jones, and The Vicar of Wakefield and The School for Scandal or The Rivals.

Then there should be a selection of the most important short poems in English, playing down the metaphysical poets now being emphasized by some of our too intellectual critics, for the poetry which has really reached the Anglo-Saxon heart even if that heart is a little soft.

The Americans to be represented would be Franklin, Poe, Emerson, Hawthorne, Whitman, Thoreau and Mark Twain. Space is not available to list the nineteenth century British writers. But this is enough to show the basis of selection.

## Presidential Message

I cannot think of a better topic for general discussion next year than the adjustment of courses in English to the needs, interests, and changed mental outlook of the returning soldier. We failed to do that last time. I was one of those that failed; but I was more aware of my failures than most, because I had been abroad and in close contact with the war throughout 1918. This time, our colleges and universities will be theaters for adult education. I am told that Yale expects its two upper classes to be made up, substantially, of veterans. The old lectures and recitations, the old philosophic approach of courses in the humanities, simply will not do. I do not

mean that they were wrong: I mean that a factor of communication between teacher and taught will have definitely changed. Nor will the returning soldiers know what they want. I expect myself, at the college level, a surprising demand for the humanities. But as every foreign masterpiece has to be retranslated every generation, so all our materials for humanism will have to be adjusted to new interpretations. I find, after the ethical shifts and volcanic conflicts and the undermining of confidence in the last few years, I cannot myself read an old book in quite the old way.

Henry S. Canby.

## A SUGGESTION FROM THE SECRETARY

In our formal education, dealing with groups rather than individuals has led us to screen our students; and teachers are trained to deal with large numbers of young people who supposedly have all arrived at the same point at the same time in the same studies, to work with them as far as the next waystation, and then to turn them over to another counselor and guide.

War-time conditions have upset all the old gradings at the "college level". Teachers are facing now, and will continue to face groups which have been screened for war, and not for formal education. The old devices will not work well; many of the old patterns have to be scrapped. Only the fundamental problem remains: where does the individual student stand on the long road, and how

can we help him go forward?

This is a time for free, frank and frequent exchange of experiences and suggestions among teachers; and it is a time when transportation conditions prevent us from getting together. Even regional conferences over a large area are unsatisfactory, if they are only gatherings of delegates. But where two or three undergraduate colleges are within easy reach of one another, their English teachers should all share experiences and discuss common problems. This Association will gladly assist in any way within its power to bring about such meetings, whether or not those concerned are within its membership. The CEA is not concerned about itself so much as about better teaching.

## NOTICE

President Canby has appointed the following Nominating Committee to prepare a slate for submission to members, who will vote by mail in December. Officers to be elected are a president, two vice-presidents, and three directors to succeed Wm. C. DeVane, Elizabeth Manwaring and W. O. Sypherd whose terms expire; and one to fill out the term of Theodore Morrison, resigned. Members are urged to send suggestions to any member of the Committee, keeping in mind geographical distribution.

Thomas O. Mabbott, chairman, Hunter College, 695 Park Ave., N. Y. City; Professors J. L. Vaughan, Univ. of Virginia; Benjamin Boyce, Municipal University of Omaha; Amanda Ellis, Colorado College; Amy V. Hall, University of Washington.

## Certified Illiteracy

Lehigh's 190 Air Corps Reservists (ASTRP) have revealed new low levels of high-school certified illiteracy. Remembering the shock the first ill-sorted ASTP's had given us last summer, we looked forward to teaching the Air Corps Reservists, carefully screened and graded, and fresh from their high school training. We expected them to be about the equal of average-to-superior civilian freshmen.

The first theme disillusioned us. Even liberal grading gave F or D to 60.2 percent of the papers. Ten and twelve misspelled words to the page were common. Errors in case ("Us fellows bought him a watch."), in agreement of pronoun and antecedent ("Everyone made their report . . ."), and in agreement of subject and verb ("There is several reasons why") occurred over and over. A high school graduate with a four-year English average above eighty wrote:

He was purty hansom and had away with wemon.

Similar in two ways was the sentence of another student:

He seeked new adventures in the way of women.

Many of the reservists lack the simplest grasp of American idiom. The son of American parents, lacking any excuse of foreign background, wrote:

That wasn't all he was interested in because he also had deep intensions in aviation. This explains for his being in the Air Corp.

Most of the men lack the ability to reduce their thoughts to clear relationships simply expressed. They write such sentences as this:

When I seen the topic of our theme, "A Character Sketch," I immediate thought of an old man when I was a very young boy.

And this:

You would think that if a son of yours made such achievements in life against the hardships he was up against, you would think his father owed him quite a bit but it just doesn't work that way.

The reservists are no better trained in reading to grasp ideas than they are in writing to express them. Yet most of these students report having been in the upper third or half of their class, with grades generally above eighty or its equivalent. What ability to use their native tongue is possessed by the other half or two-thirds? What standards of clearness, correctness, and good usage have our high schools been demanding? What is the value of a high school diploma?

These and similar questions are pertinent for the colleges and universities which will have the job of educating the thousands of high school graduates who origi-

(Continued on Page 4)

## THE NEWS LETTER

Editor

BURGES JOHNSON

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## Editorial

There are not too many colleges in these United States to meet the needs of our growing population; but too many of them are badly distributed, or badly financed, or both. It is too late to do much about the distribution, for it is hard to move a college. They have been crowded together in certain areas because of unchristian competition between Christian denominations.

There is not much that can be done about under-endowment in an area where there are too many colleges. It would help if trustees set a definite limitation of numbers and then figured out the annual income necessary to maintain a college of that size, with decent salaries for the faculty; and then went after the money. Such budgeting would appeal to the intelligence of business men who are asked to give. But such colleges generally yearn to be as big as they can possibly get!

When there are too many such colleges too near together there is bound to be fierce competition for all high school graduates within reach, if only to get their tuition fees. We heard the president of a small Presbyterian college in the middle west complaining bitterly because a neighboring Methodist college had kidnapped two Methodist freshmen out of his gymnasium while they were engaged in basket-ball practice, held them in durance far from vile while feeding and entertaining them, until they were persuaded they had chosen the wrong college.

Discussing such matters is outside the business of this column, were it not for the fact that all liberal arts courses are harmfully affected. In competing for students the colleges must make high-pressure appeals. The most obvious

are those which reinforce the advertising found in cheap magazines.

"Enroll in our school and we will turn you into a successful (lawyer) (diesel engine operator) (chef) (business psychologist) (sanitary engineer) (author) (barber) (advertising man). Salaries have been earned in any one of these trades or professions up to twenty thousand (\$20,000.) dollars a year, with the sort of training we provide."

The magazine advertising of shoddy correspondence schools and the high pressure salesmanship of college agents combine to create an attitude of mind in high school seniors throughout the land. Many of their parents have such an attitude already! Only by bringing up the youngster with a different attitude can education be saved.

Why major in English or History or Philosophy when one can major in advertising or Insurance or Journalism or Hotel Management or Accounting throughout the undergraduate years?

"I wanted to major in Philosophy more than anything else" writes a young graduate, "but Dad kept saying 'What'll it get you?' until I finally gave in. I majored in Advertising, which had two instructors on the faculty, and I learned all those two men had to teach me in my freshman year. Then I had to take three more courses from each of them in the remaining years. All the courses had different names, but they were the same stuff over again. When I finally got a job I found out that almost any other courses in the catalog would have been of greater service to me in an advertising office than those advertising courses. Sounds silly, doesn't it? But it's true."

We who believe in "English" at the college level may advertise it as essential training for a vocation, if we like, for that is true; but the members of this Association believe it is far more than a collection of techniques and recipes. It is essential training and furnishment of the broadly developed mind.

If American colleges had not gotten themselves into the undignified position of competing for students, and luring them by specious promises, the liberal arts would be far less on the defensive than they are today.

Many members of CEA in good standing may receive two copies of this issue of the *News Letter*, accompanied by addressed envelopes for the mailing of dues. This will not be the result of error, but because extra copies have been mailed to a long non-membership list from which members' names have not been sifted. Anyone receiving two copies is urged to constitute himself a membership committee of one, and pass his extra copy along to a colleague who might be persuaded to join.

Join the CEA now, by mailing \$2.00 to the Treasurer, and you will be enrolled as a member, fully paid, for the calendar year 1945, receiving Oct., Nov., and Dec. *News Letters* and any other 1944 publications free.

## Gleaned from the Mail

Dear Editor:

A device which I have found valuable in teaching theme-writing is as follows:

I ask the members of the class to choose partners—so that the entire class is divided into groups of two. In each of these groups I designate one member as "author" and the other as "editor." The author is instructed to write a theme, usually on an assigned subject, and to bring it to the next class meeting.

When he brings his theme to class, I allow each author to discuss his paper for twenty minutes with his partner, the editor. I go from group to group, offering advice if the students ask for it. At the end of the twenty-minute discussion period the editors keep the themes which their partners have written. They take the themes away with them and revise them in the light of the twenty-minute discussion.

The revised themes are handed in to me at the class meeting following that on which the discussion takes place. If the theme grade is, say, an 80, both partners are given 80. In order to give everyone equal opportunity I make it a policy to shuffle the groups from time to time.

It should be added that, when the authors are writing their themes, the editors have a reading assignment. When the editors are revising the themes, the authors have the same reading assignment.

The students like this type of work. It gives them an opportunity to talk over their writing problems with their equals—equals who are genuinely interested because, for one thing, their grades are involved. Errors in punctuation and mechanics are notably reduced in these revised papers, and, to speak broadly, the themes are more finished than the usual run.

I cannot resist adding that it is always good to get students to work together on their problems. It is valuable for a young man to have to work hand in glove with other young men on academic problems. Most academic assignments are insulated, each man doing his own lesson. This editor-author device is designed, in part, to teach students to think together and to co-operate on academic problems as closely as they do on social or athletic problems.

Bard McNulty,  
Trinity College,  
Hartford, Conn.

Dear Editor:

I don't need to tell you that I am for emphasis on the liberal arts in education, after the war or at any time. There is no education without them.

Neither do I need to tell you that I mean by the liberal arts a lot more than courses in English, or even in "the Humanities" if that term is taken as having merely literary force. The teaching of English had better be better than it is, and soon; but the directest way for it to improve is through shakeups in the teacher's

mind which result in his understanding what he is up to, what it is that he teaches, and why this is necessary for any good person to know. He won't get this far unless he has become interested in other things than literature—philosophy, history, science, and mathematics. These are as much a part of liberal education as the fine arts are, and indeed the fine arts, including poetry, can't properly be discussed without them. In other words, the English teacher had better get himself educated. If you want to know, I don't consider that I have done so—yet.

Sincerely,  
Mark Van Doren.

Dear Editor:

Thank you for your delightful squib on pedagogy.

Members of our department were suggesting the other day a proposal to put all jargonists and pseudo-scientists in the U. S. A. in a university of their own on a desert isle—no matter in what department they are found. One member suggested the name for it: The University of Gobbledy Gook!

"Educationists," as distinguished from educators, would be the large nucleus, and psychologists and sociologists—and all verbalists and sufferers from logorrhea would complete the enrollment. Swinburne would preside over the Chair of Poetry as Professor Emeritus.

I came across this the other day—which you may not have seen:

"Laughter is a synchronized coordination of neuropsychological reflexes with a semi-automatic impulse of mass inherited subjectivism."

Sincerely,  
Robert M. Smith,  
Lehigh University.

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## For a Moratorium on The Confusionists

How about a moratorium on talk about confusion in education? Pick up almost any periodical these days, and there is an article starting out telling all the world in mournful accents that education, especially liberal education, is in a mess. Go to a meeting or chat with your colleagues: it is likely to be the same story. Liberal education is in the doldrums; it has been dealt a body blow by the war and is languishing on like a wounded soul in an oxygen tent, with who knows how many days yet to survive. After the war, vocational education will be all the fashion: the poor liberal arts, all dressed up and no place to go! One hears that the returning soldiers will demand the quick and direct route to a job: no literature, or history, or languages for them. Or that if anyone at all wants the humanities he will want them in a new dress, in a drastically revised curriculum, under new conditions, with all new methods. None of the old stuff; no sir, none of the old stuff at all.

Along with this, we learn that the mess and confusion we are in is all our own fault. We haven't known what we were about, and we haven't believed in our own subjects, have been perfunctory and scholarly and dry rather than human and alive. And we are told the dire conditions under which we may perchance survive—if we stir ourselves soon enough and hard enough in the direction of new ways and new habits of thought. Sackcloth and ashes for the humanities. Wailing and tears for the teacher of literature. Penance, contrition, expiation and reform for all of us. Or else the inevitable reward: eclipse, oblivion, dust to dust!

And hearing all this, I am awestruck, awestruck. Aren't we all? Shouldn't we all be? The thing to be feared most in the world is fear itself. The surest way to lose the confidence of others is to lose faith in ourselves. And loss of faith is the signpost to failure. When a political party wants to put its opponents out of business, it deliberately sets out to create distrust. Night and day, year after year, the words 'blundering' and 'confusion' and 'muddling' and 'failure' are dinned into the minds of people until they believe what they hear. But in liberal education we wait for no opposition party to point up our sins. We face a world crisis; we are shocked into greater awareness; we see we are not perfect; and we fall into a fit of panic and an orgy of self-accusation.

Well, it is all right to be shocked occasionally. We aren't perfect, and we should know it. We ought to have known it anyway; we ought to have been doing something about healing our sores; and we ought to keep doing it now, with whatever aid new light from the war may bring. It is one of the facts of life that great crises tend to reveal truth with terrible clarity. But pessimism about our condition, no. A

yielding to an impulse to confusion, no. Let us keep our heads, and keep our faith. Ours is a great subject, and we can learn to teach it better. But whether we do or not, the post-war generation, I predict, is going to give its share of attention to literature. It will have need for the comfort and light and wisdom that are in great books, and we should hold ourselves ready to give and to interpret. I do not know how to explain it, but in my own school from October to March of the current year, though the enrollment in our college decreased one-fourth, the number of students concentrating in English went up ten per cent. In the same period some of the more "practical" subjects lost rather heavily. Whatever the cause, here is one little fact that appears to controvert the calamity-boys. And after the war, there is no reason to believe that it will be different. It was not after 1918; there was no boycotting of humane education then. In natural reaction to the deadly business of warfare, young men may turn gladly to the civilizing influences of the humanities. No one knows of course. But in the meantime confusion to the confusionists; and as for the rest of us, let us keep our chins up and our defenses in good order.

Clarence D. Thorpe,  
? University of Michigan.

## Vanderbilt Conference On the Humanities

At Vanderbilt University, Nashville, Tennessee, was held during the week July 24-29 the second of a series of conferences on the humanities by representatives of about thirty colleges and universities in the Southeast, including the state of Texas. An earlier meeting, called at the instance of a humanities group at Vanderbilt, and attended by a smaller group from the same area, in November 1943, had worked out a general plan for the summer conference and had assigned a variety of special investigations and projects to individuals or sub-committees. Both meetings received financial aid from the Rockefeller Foundation.

The theme of the conference was, and still is, "The Humanities—their opportunities and obligations in higher education in a democracy," in which the term "the Humanities" is taken to mean "those disciplines traditionally so denominated in American colleges," including history and philosophy.

The July conference divided its labors and discussions among five major topics, each topic receiving attention at two daily sessions: I. Place and function of the humanities in liberal education, II. Subject-matter appropriate to the achievement of these aims, III. Organization of the humanities program for achieving these aims, IV. Problems of instruction incident to achieving these aims, V. The place of the humanities in American higher education.

Details of the res adjudicatae  
(Continued on Page 4)

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### CERTIFIED ILLITERACY

(Continued from Page 1)

nally did not plan to go to college but after the war will take advantage of the G. I. Bill of Rights to get college training at government expense. In a much larger sense these questions and their answers are the concern of every taxpayer who supports the public schools, of every citizen who believes that a sound democracy can be maintained only by an educated electorate. How sound is our education when even high school graduates, with two years' more formal training than the average citizen, cannot really read or write?

Glenn J. Christensen,  
Lehigh University.

### VANDERBILT CONFERENCE ON THE HUMANITIES

(Continued from Page 3)

et gestae may be of interest to readers of *The News Letter*. "Some of the qualities to be conferred upon the individual by a study of the humanities are enjoyment, breadth, judgment, and strength." "The program of liberal education implies that the greatest need of American life is a certain type of man . . . Formal education can only begin to produce such a man . . . The humanities are only a part of this inclusive educational purpose."

With regard to subject-matter, the English teacher should "keep in mind the fact that literature is a depository of man's attempt to express his emotional life, his spiritual nature, and his relationships to man. He should attempt to enlighten and humanize in such a manner as to facilitate the immediate transfer of intellectual and spiritual values to the student's life relationships . . . The study of language is essential to the full appreciation of literature . . . The student should at some time . . . have an adequate course in American literature. The department of English must recognize the importance of acquaintance with other literatures." Offerings in the fine arts should be made available.

In the teaching of foreign languages, tested new methods of instruction should be freely accepted. Consideration should be given to the desirability of establishing somewhere in the South a center for the study of Asiatic languages. Philosophy "should be an attitude which permeates the entire college program," but it should be made available also as a discipline. "For the fullest realization of humanistic values . . . religion will often need to be studied as a separately organized body of subject-matter. History should "show the student his own place in society and inform him about the forces, including ideas, which have made him what he is and created the society in which he is to live."

The Conference assumed as fundamental principles (1) that the curriculum of the liberal arts college should be made for the student, not the student re-made for the curriculum, but that the faculty as a whole, not student whims and fads, should determine

it. "The liberal arts college should be restored to its former authority and integrity as an instrument for helping to educate the complete human personality, not the specialist, the professional, or the tradesman. All liberal arts subjects, properly taught, are humanistic, and they should be so taught." The average ratio of time devoted to the humanities in Southern institutions is too low; at least fifty per cent of the programs for the first two years should be devoted to humanities subjects, should be largely prescribed, and should be taught for their humanistic values, not merely as tool subjects.

The Conference could not agree on a prescription for the junior-senior years; but did go on record as urging that every student be directed into as many of the humanistic disciplines as may be consonant with a well-integrated program for his special needs; professed faith in a plastic and flexible long-range plan of study; and pleaded for more liberal, less departmentalized organization and administration of the curriculum. An acceptable minimum list of required courses would include: one year of English composition and one year of English literature, a general literature, or a humanistic-survey course; one year of history; and sufficient training in at least one foreign language (ancient or modern) to enable the student to carry to successful completion a course in the literature of that language and to demonstrate capacity to use the language in other fields of study. The Conference recorded its approval of consideration of and experimentation with various types of courses surveying the humanities, some of which have been tried and reported upon.

Several policies and practices for taking care of the needs of both inferior and superior students were described, and these were recommended to the Conference institutions for consideration. Discussion of "Problems of Instruction" eventuated in agreement on the qualifications of the teacher of the humanities—one "who, through native endowment, education, vital social living, and professional growth, has achieved for himself the goals of humanistic education . . . a practising humanist with the passion and the power to humanize others"; on the philosophy and emphasis of a teaching process centered in the individual because "mass education in the humanities is impossible"; and on various types of teaching methods designed as far as possible to individualize instruction and test achievement above the level of information and memory.

The fifty-odd representatives of thirty colleges and universities in the South left Nashville not so much with a feeling of satisfaction over things done—for few matters could be settled—as with a hope that an esprit had been engendered and an organization effected that may secure for the humanities their rightful place and opportunity in the postwar South.

—Arthur Palmer Hudson,  
University of No. Carolina.

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